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ABSTRACT

A study sought to determine the relationship between grammar competency and success in a business communication course. Students completed a written English competency test consisting of 25 sentences, each with one of eight kinds of errors, including comma splice and incorrect pronoun reference. Students were then asked to choose the one appropriate correction from among four choices. Data, which consisted of the test scores and the students' written report and course grades, were collected from 236 students in 25 different sections of a basic business communications course taught at a large state university. Completion of the entire freshman English sequence was a prerequisite for the course. The study found (1) a significant, but relatively low correlation between written report grades and scores on the usage test; (2) a moderate correlation between final course grade and grammatical competency; (3) a slight relationship between students' reactions to past writing classes and their scores on the test; and (4) a significant relationship between competency scores and the likelihood of a student completing the course. The results indicate that student grades for formal reports and for the course could be raised by improving their grammatical competency, and that negative student attitudes toward grammar instruction can be overcome. The grammar test used in the study proved to be a good predictor of success. (HTH)

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GRAMMAR COMPETENCY AND BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a research project which sought to determine the relationship between grammar competency and success in a business communications course. While several authors have discussed the relationship in the past (particularly as it applied to composition), few have done any empirical research. The study's findings indicate a statistically significant but small correlation between grammatical compentency and students' scores on research projects, and a moderate correlation between competency and the final report. The study also shows that students' competency affects the likelihood of their remaining in the class, while past experiences with grammar and composition have relatively little correlation with their success in the course.

GRAMMAR AND COMPETENCY

For some time, professionals have disputed whether or not a relationship exists between competency in grammar and academic success in communication, especially business communication. The issue has been debated for some time with vocal opponents on either side. However, most writing on the subject base their arguments on subjective impressions; empirical analysis has been rare.

Arguments For Teaching Grammar

The arguments for and against including grammar follow clear patterns. A typical argument for including training in grammar is that of Leo Daugherty who states that such training gives "people access to the written language they were born into." [3] Allen Smith presents another typical argument when he notes that acceptable grammar is one of the keys to upward mobility. [6] A survey among non-academics, professionals, and business persons conducted by Maxine Hairston supported the argument; the respondents reacted negatively to grammar errors found in business communications. [5]

Business communication professionals have generally argued that grammatical competency is essential to effective communication. Robert Tesch, for example, assumes that a good grasp is essential (citing others' subjective impressions), and reports on a study which

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showed that students' grasp of grammar did improve with instruction. [7] Clyde Wilkinson argues training in grammar, while often a remedial effort, is needed in order to make students' writing acceptable in the business world. [8]

Arguments Against Teaching Grammar

The arguments against the need for grammar are equally strong. Thomas Farrell argues that "just as the conventions of regularized spelling, punctuation, and grammar were late historical developments, so too the perfection of these matters should be late in the teaching of the writing process." [4] Elizabeth Cowan argues that the back-to-basics movement (which stresses training in grammar) is grounded in an anti-intellectual love for prescriptive grammar based "on little more than a good old days mindset and a personal, unexamined opinion that rigor and sternness as teaching techniques and 'the basics' as subject matter will solve the problem of teaching students to write." Citing the lack of objective foundation for the back-to-basics movement, Cowan uses none herself. [2] Finally, Jim Corder argues that the return to the basics "seems to be in some ways a vague yearning to be otherwise, to return to some Golden Age when things were right--a relatively harmless form of nostalgia." [1]

ENGLISH COMPETENCY SURVEY

The primary purpose of the study detailed here was to determine whether or not a significant relationship exists between students' English grammar competency and their major report and final course grade in a business communications course.

Testing Instrument

A written English competency test was developed for this study. Each of the 25 sentences on the test represented one from among the following eight errors: comma splice (CS), sentence fragment (FR), verb form (VF), fused sentence (FU), misplaced modifier (MM), subject verb agreement (AG), dangling participle (DP), and pronoun reference (PR). Students were then asked to choose the one appropriate correction from among four choices. The other unambiguous choices, essentially identical in meaning, were different only in being grammatically incorrect. The instrument was pretested and statistically verified for content and criterion validity using remedial composition students and MBA candidates. Business communication students, MBA students, and remedial students scored significantly different at the .05 level on a one-way analysis of variance. Construct validity was established by asking business communication and English instructors to evaluate the appropriateness of the concepts presented in the test. Reliability was established using the test-retest procedure. No significant difference existed between the two test administrations.

Data Collection and Sample

Data, which consisted of English usage scores and the students' final grades, were collected from 25 different sections of a basic business communication course taught in the College of Business Administration at a large state university. Completion of the entire freshman English sequence is a prerequisite for this course. These 25 sections were taught by eight different instructors who all followed the same basic course outline. Only one of the instructors had an English background; the rest were from business-related areas.

While all 689 students enrolled took the English test, a randomization process was used to select 281 students whose errors were analyzed for this study. Of these 281 students, 28 dropped the course, and 17 were not included because of incomplete and incorrect data. The English usage test was administered during the second week of the semester. No formal, detailed instruction in grammar preceded or followed the test.

The course from which the sample came is made up of four major components: communication theory, business report writing, business letters, and oral communication. Students may earn up to 700 points divided among objective tests (300 pts.), a formal report (200 pts.), letters (100 pts.), and an oral report (75 pts.). Written assignments are judged on their adherence to development of content (including detail and logical consistency), coherence, form, organization, and grammar. Instructors assume that students are already competent in grammar; hence no formal grammatical review is given in the area. Thus, while grading takes grammatical proficiency into consideration, that is only one of the many elements which determine the students' final score.

RESULTS

The study determined several significant correlations between grammar and the business communication course surveyed.

Findings

The study found four correlations of interest to business communications professionals.

1. The study determined that a significant, but relatively low correlation exists between written report grades and scores on the usage test ($r = .24$, $p = .0002$).

2. A significant, moderate correlation exists between final grades in the business communication course surveyed and grammatical competency ($r = .36$, $p = .0001$).

3. A significant, but slight relationship exists between students' previous reactions to past writing classes and their score on the testing instrument ($r = .155$, $p = .0006$).

4. A significant relationship exists between competency scores and the likelihood of a student completing the course. Those completing the course had a mean score of 72%; those dropping the course scored a mean of 65%.

Implications

Several implications arise from the findings set out above. First, the grades on the formal report and in the course can be improved to a degree by raising a students' level of competency in grammar. This competency, as Tesch has shown [7], can be improved through instruction--either classroom or programmed.

Second, students' reactions to previous instruction in grammar and composition does have some effect on the students' performance, but teaching of grammar to those with negative attitudes need not be seen as a hopeless task; these attitudes can be overcome.

Third, this test is a good predictor of success--in the course surveyed at least. Those who do not do well on the test can be encouraged to review grammar during the course or even drop the course and work in improving grammar during the interim. If necessary, the test could be used as a screening device.

AREAS NEEDING FURTHER STUDY

This study opens up several areas for further study. For one thing, the reason grammar plays the part it does in affecting students' success in business communication needs to be explored.

Similarly, the relationship of the other factors used in evaluating students to those students' success in a business communication course needs to be determined. These factors include content, coherence, organization, and form.

Another area needing empirical analysis is the relationship between competency in grammar and successful communication in the real world. It may be that the relative grammatical incompetency of the receiver may enter in. That is, if he or she cannot perceive errors (or in fact repeats them), is communication affected one way or the other?

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